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Trapped on Love Boat: Middling and Transient Entrapment among Balkan Seafarers in the Cruise Industry

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Abstract

Globalization has led to a plethora of temporary, seasonal and transient jobs characterized by poor work conditions, tolerated by workers with the hope that such jobs will lead to better positions. Yet, it is not uncommon to find workers that spend years in temporary positions. Examining a cadre of cruise crew members from the Balkans who have repeatedly occupied transient jobs, this study addresses the underpinning discourses of savings, care and human capital that serve both to sustain and to entrap workers in transient positions. The ability to save and remit savings to their families allow transient workers to engage in “middling” back home, saving money to invest in homes, businesses or mobility capital. However, structural constraints on labor markets and a disconnect from local networks limit their ability to reach their goals and leverage their time on board to secure more permanent jobs, prompting the workers to repeatedly return to their temporary seafarer positions.

Keywords: transient migration; cruise workers; gender; Balkans; Transnational labor; Bourdieu.

Introduction

Globalization has shifted the sphere of activity for most migrant labor from full-time work to temporary, seasonal or transient positions (Bin and Morris, 2006). All too often, with transiency comes poor labor conditions, tolerated with the hope that such jobs are just temporary stepping stones to bigger, better and more permanent positions. Yet, it is not uncommon to find workers that spend years working under the same transient conditions (Gibson, 2008). Examining a cadre of cruise crew members from the Balkans who have been in situations of repetitive transiency, this study addresses the underpinning discourses of savings, care and mobility capital that can serve both to sustain and entrap workers in transient careers.

Throughout the Balkans, cruise jobs are advertised as a highly desirable form of temporary work (Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp, 2011). Cruise agencies advocate for myriad positions on large ships that allow seafarers to work legally while traveling the world, learning foreign languages, and experiencing foreign cultures. Cruise jobs are especially attractive to those frustrated with un- or underemployment in their home countries, or those who wish to avoid other risky arrangements that characterize transient migration (Johnson, 2012). Aspiring cruise workers hope that they will be able to realize an earnings

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potential that exceeds other land-based opportunities, and possibly open doors to migration (Terry, 2011). Yet, work arrangements on cruise ships are typically characterized by short-term contracts, long shifts, and taxing labor conditions within a workforce featuring racial, ethnic and gendered tensions (Wood, 2000). Legal work on cruise ships appears to share quite a bit with illegal labor conditions on land (Chin, 2008).

But if cruise crew jobs are so difficult and transient, then why do laborers repeatedly sign up for such contracts? While cruise contracts are inherently short-term, it is not uncommon to find individuals who have cobbled together a cruise career over a decade, retaining back-to-back contracts, rendering longevity to their transiency. In many cases, they report unsuccessful efforts to find a job in their home country between cruise contracts or find it challenging to break into labor markets characterized by even poorer or less well-compensating conditions.

Arguably, the perception of having few if any real alternatives to cruise ship employment is constructed to a large extent by globalized forces of labor and increased expectations of mobility and flexibility of labor conditions nationally (Chin, 2011). Yet, those who repeatedly return do so with aspirations and goals that they believe are achievable. The ability to save and remit savings to their families allow transient workers to engage in “middling” back home, investing in houses, businesses or educational opportunities or to accumulate mobility capital toward future migration. The agency and determination of workers undertaking such repeated hardship to reach their goals is commendable, especially given their extensive physical and emotional labor. Yet, this article explores the limitations and elusiveness of middling through transient jobs and argues that structural constraints on land and disconnect from local networks limit transient workers’ ability to find more permanent jobs. Their hard-earned savings may be drained by the needs of families, compelling the workers to repeatedly return to their seafarer vocations, limiting hopes of making such transient positions facilitators of migration. Thus, the cruise industry tends to draw repeat employment, often turning transience into a permanent condition as workers become structurally and emotionally trapped.

Middling Through Transnational Transiency

Transient careers play a significant role in creating economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) for a host of skilled and semi-skilled immigrants as they work to acquire degrees and job experience that can upgrade their economic and social standing in both their home countries and abroad. Given the “contextuality and multilevel quality of careers,” recent research shows that even semi-skilled migrants from developing countries undertake transient jobs as they face significant obstacles to access labor markets (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011). Among the key challenges: their degrees or



qualifications are not always transferable, home-country job experience may not be recognized, and legal migration systems are in some cases not in sync with labor market requirements (Sachar, 2006). Taken together, these can result in an abundance of comprised careers in temporary service-oriented jobs that are adopted—and retained—as a commonly used survival strategy.

Recent literature has emphasized that such transiency could be “purposeful” for many educated and semi-skilled migrants from developing countries. Parutis (2011) notes that they may seek to use transient positions as a stepping stone from *any* job to a *better* job to the *dream* job as a viable strategy to overcome structural limitations. Workers utilize transnational mobility and temporary jobs to “escape harsh conditions and move to better jobs and locations,” or to support themselves financially while they gain language skills or train for a new career (Alberti, 2014). Transiency can, in theory, be regarded as an opportunity for individuals to break the social and economic caps of home or host settings. While there is no guarantee of a successful outcome, such future plans and expected future gains can change the way workers perceive their temporary jobs, shifting their attitudes and willingness to repeatedly engage a sector that may carry some costs (Parutis, 2014).

Termed “transnational middling,” taking on temporary jobs that may be undesirable or below their skill level could help individuals distinguish themselves in the long run, whether through the economic savings that such jobs enable or through the additional human and cultural capital gained through this process (Conradson and Latham, 2005). Middling has recently been studied in the context of Eastern European migrants to European Union countries and the transient paths that migrants hope will eventually lead to higher levels of integration, better educational and linguistic skills, access to careers with better status, and ultimately the inclusion of migrants as members of middle class (Parutis, 2014). Other studies suggest that some middling migrant workers are even able to use strategies of temporary employment as a “transnational exit power” to resist entrapment in low-paying jobs under difficult conditions (Alberti, 2014). Still others assess middling in terms of the social status and life experiences that could enrich the cultural capital of the immigrants. (Jaskulowski, 2018)

This study is particularly focused on the junction of precarious employment and liminality experienced through repeated experiences in transient jobs that economically and socially marginalize immigrants in the long run. A strategy of middling through a series of transient jobs subjects workers to liminality between different social worlds and labor conditions. Transient workers may not have the ability to bridge into better labor markets if the skills and networks they gain from the transient positions are not transferable. Even when the transient job offers gains in cultural and human capital, such as new linguistic



and cross-cultural skills, those gains may not be realized if the bridges between those temporary jobs and preferable labor markets, at home or abroad, are not well-established. Somewhat well-paying temporary jobs then become the priority for earning potential, bringing a sense of security to precariously situated lives that is only sustained through permanent employment in the temporary fields (Stevens, 2018).

Conventional wisdom suggests that even if immigrants experience de-skilling in the labor market, the earning potential of such temporary jobs may still enable savings and investments that could lead to higher social status back home. Recent studies of middling returnees, however, indicate that they may find themselves struggling to fit in upon return, with fewer resources than their peers who qualify for government benefits and home-country networks (Ho and Ley, 2014). Studies of student-migrants—who in some cases undertake transient jobs due to an immigration status which may preclude exploration of preferred career options—show that a series of temporary jobs may have an entrapment effect on student migrants that prevent them from accessing the labor markets once they earn their degrees (Luthra and Plath, 2016).

For transient positions such as cruise work, precarious employment prospects grow exponentially as the total work experience (Weaver 2005) aboard a ship creates its own world: one in which skills and experiences may not be transferable to land-based jobs, a situation that many cruise workers may not recognize until they homeward return (Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp, 2011). It may be difficult for employers to make sense of outside work experiences that build on situations that are neither fully national nor transnational. Such transient jobs disconnect workers from economic resources such as host country networks that would provide credible access to their labor markets. While the ability to transfer skill gains to improve economic and social status at home are limited, segmented labor market access in home countries and/or a continued familial dependence on remittances are likely to send workers back to the same or comparable transient positions, in effect entrapping workers in what is referred to as “transient servitude” (Vogel, 2011).

Globalization has created categories of jobs where workers engage in transnational labor that fails to provide opportunities for transnational mobility. Cruise workers embody such truncated mobility, where seafarer legal status is limited to operations in international waters and to the duration of employment contracts; cruise lines make no promise of future work visas and cannot promise access to any country past short-visit durations. Ironically, such transient positions attract workers with migration aspirations who seek to accumulate mobility capital in the form of savings, linguistic skills or international experiences to access migration networks and opportunities. Ultimately, the capacity of transient jobs to facilitate migration proves elusive



for many. Such positions clearly provide some benefits to individual laborers, but also entice them to remain in transient contracts for much longer than originally intended; adding additional work years to be able to afford the costs of their initial immigration aspirations.

Many cruise workers develop narratives of savings and family care that serve to sustain their efforts and they regard transient jobs as a mechanism to move from the current *temporary* job to the prospective *dream* job. Dreaming is a way to resist precarity for those who lack competencies for participation in higher-end labor markets (Bucaite-Vilke, 2015). When the middle remains elusive, dreaming and hoping can serve as strategies of survival and resilience. Migrants engage precarious labor markets with “inherent constraints on the one hand and ambitions for the future on the other” (Baas, 2017). Anthropological studies have characterized the hopes and expectations of migrants as “active waiting,” where the workers are able to conceptualize better futures and to acquire both skills and savings that would enable them to reach their aspirations (Brun, 2015). At the same time, the aspirations and creativity of workers that enable them to thrive in these jobs may also become a narrative of family care and dependence on savings that conspire to entrap such workers in situations where, in practice, the most viable option may be to continue working onboard—leading to a perpetual cycle of transiency and liminality.

Balkan Seafarers in Cruise Lines

Eastern European and Balkan countries range among the highest number of ocean cruise line seafarers following those from Indonesia and the Philippines (Terry, 2011). In an international hierarchy of nationalities deemed appropriate for particular crew positions, Balkan nationalities are often preferred by cruise agents for work on hospitality positions that deal with direct customer service, such as waiters, bar staff and guest relations (Dragin et al, 2014). In general, on ocean cruise lines, Serbians, Bulgarians, Croatians, Slovaks and Turks are most widely hired for customer-facing jobs such as waiters, shop staff, and stewardship positions. Cruise agencies sometimes indicate that workers from the Balkans appear Caucasian and presentable, are hard-working and polite, even though some have complained that Balkan crew members do not smile enough to customers compared to other nationalities (Bruns, 2008). This perception places Balkan workers in the middle of a range of crew positions, where they have access to cruise guests but their future earnings highly depend on their willingness to perform and take on emotional labor to provide exceptional customer service (Weaver, 2005). With high levels of young, semi-skilled populations and a variety of linguistic skills, the Balkans present a well of human resources for transient employment in the cruise industry. Yet, despite their continued presence, the scholarly literature has not focused



extensively on the experiences of Balkan seafarers as a group; as they tend to be spread out on ships, occupying a variety of jobs and together comprise about a dozen separate nationalities which may make them less visible than concentrations of workers from countries such as the Philippines or Indonesia.

The Balkan region is characterized by economies with high unemployment rates for young, educated workers. The transition economies in the region display “high unemployment and underemployment, growing wage and income inequalities, a large informal economy and relatively insecure, precarious and often low wage employment for the majority” (Bin and Morris, 2014). Tourism constitutes a major sector of the economies of the countries in a region segregated between countries which are fully part of the European Union (EU), such as Bulgaria and Croatia, and those outside that framework. EU membership affects the types of movement available to the nationals of each country and opportunities for those who would like to work abroad.

Over the past several years, Balkan countries have become major cruise destinations for Mediterranean cruise lines as well as river cruises along the Danube river basin which hire numerous workers from the region (Dragin et al, 2014). However, river cruises prefer to hire seasoned workers with a strong background in hospitality and fluid linguistic skills, leading to a perception that ocean cruises are a better form of transient employment for younger workers if the goal is to save money, travel, and/or improve human capital (Sehkanan and Sevcikova, 2014).

The strong presence of cruise agencies, which operate in every country in the Balkans, facilitates the task of finding crew positions and promotes ocean liners as desirable transient opportunities for young men and women from the region. Kouzon, for example, is the major crewing agency that leads hires for Royal Caribbean, Celebrity and Norwegian Cruise lines, among others. In locations such as Macedonia, the company has maintained a strong presence with 23 local agencies in the major cities of this relatively small country alone (Kouzon, 2016). Spring months bring forth hard-to-miss Kouzon advertisements for regional cruise job fairs and recruitment events throughout the region, with operations extending from Banja Luka to Antalya. In Croatia, Kouzon holds the only official license to mediate the employment of seafarers. Such agencies advertise a wide range of opportunities for young people from the Balkans, a steady and persuasive online and in-country presence that makes transient positions seem desirable and obtainable for prospective seafarers from the Balkans. In turn, cruise lines have access to a ready supply of necessary labor.

The research presented here draws on primary source interviews with a dozen seafarers from the Balkans who were working on ocean cruise lines that docked in Istanbul and Kusadasi in Turkey during the summer of 2015. Turkish ports are considered desirable embarkation locations for Balkan crew due to



geographical and cultural proximity to home, and amenities such as easily accessible wireless and internet services as well banking and telephone access that enable seafarers to tend to their families and business at home. Research material includes interviews, conducted in English and Turkish, correspondence with seafarers and observations of the online blogs and websites associated with Balkan workers in the cruise industry. The interviews were conducted in Turkish and English while the workers were off their respective cruise ships, with informal discussions extending to whatever time and work conditions of the crew allowed. Prior personal and professional connections facilitated open-ended discussions with Turkish and Macedonian seafarers and their colleagues from the Balkans through a snow-ball effect. Indeed, many respondents sought such a dialogue in part because they wanted to learn more about graduate schools and hospitality work in the United States. All individuals referenced below have been anonymized to protect their privacy. The following analysis offers preliminary insights into the importance of a narrative of goals in sustaining and trapping Balkan seafarers as they try to middle in their societies through their savings and elevated human capital.

Middling through Savings

At 28, Marko has been on board cruise lines for five years. He points out that his education does not qualify him for “good” jobs in the tourism sector back home in Bulgaria. He would like to be able to save enough money to afford the loan on the flat he is planning to buy, which he believes will also make him more eligible to get married. Right now, he is supporting both his sister’s education and his mother’s daily expenses. He believes that with more savings, he can buy a plot of land and actually build a bigger house, or be able to buy two small apartments and rent them. He does not necessarily see a future for himself in the tourism industry, but would much rather invest in real estate that “gets him somewhere.” He believes he needs to work through a few more contracts aboard to accumulate sufficient amount of savings.

The pervasive hope of many workers in the cruise industry is that their humble savings will enable upward mobility through investment in land, rental homes, or acquisitions such as boutiques or restaurants. This approach of saving to invest in income producing assets is a commonly held assumption for Balkan cruise employees who undertake undesirable jobs and bear uncomfortable work environments in order to move ahead in the class structure of their countries. In each case, such aspirations are grounded in traditional forms of rentier economies, where owning a piece of land, a house or a small business could enable the worker to become middle class, and provide for their families (Artini et al, 2011).

The savings imperative is a dominant narrative, and it differentiates cruise workers from other tourism sector jobs where earnings are cyclical or seasonal,



and the savings are for spending during the low season (Artini et al, 2011). A crew member's inability to spend significant money on board, resulting from long work days and limited access to alternatives (most lower level crew do not have access to the restaurants, casino, bars or shops that serve the cruise customers) allows them to build modest savings in spite of limited compensation (Gibson, 2008). Moreover, since room and board are provided, this structure arguably should operate as a built-in savings system. This is supplemented by a reliance on tips to earn a more substantive wage, which is highly dependent on the groups they serve and the level of their visibility with the customers. The tip structure that most of the crew members depend on is based on small amounts deducted from customers' accounts, and the willingness of cruise passengers to leave tips in return for excellent service (Weaver, 2014).

The savings potential of cruise work is exaggerated in the promotional literature of cruise agencies as a way to attract potential employees. The reality, as reported by researchers and employees alike, is not as straightforward. Detailed accounts show that the work conditions at sea are not any better, and perhaps worse, than many land jobs, especially for low-skilled laborers who end up in *crew* positions rather than better paying *staff* positions on the cruise ships (Chin, 2008). Studies show that seafarers settle for with long contracts—9 to 10 months, followed by two months of unpaid leave—with monthly salaries as low as \$50 before tips, including boarding in small quarters below decks (Reynolds and Weikel, 2016). They typically work long hours—10-14 per day on average—with no overtime compensation, often with additional duties that do not count toward their work hours, seven days a week, with back-to-back shifts (Gibson, 2008).

Seafarers have substantial upfront costs even prior to start of their employment contract. Even though it is against International Labor Organization (ILO) regulations for agencies to charge for employment applications and associated training, agencies commonly charge between \$1,000-5,000 for training (Matuszewski and Blenkinsopp, 2011). Applicants, if hired, also typically pay for one-way airfare to their embarkation destination, and put another one-way fare on deposit with the agency in case they leave their position before their contract is up. These training fees and embarkation costs place many workers in debt even before they begin their cruise careers (Sehkaran and Sevkinova, 2014).

Moreover, crew members face various on-board expenses that result from their dependence on others to achieve service excellence to tip-providing cruise passengers (Dragin, et al 2011). Extra payments are transferred between crew members to speed up cleaning of uniforms or to get a passenger's request get to the top of a list, limiting savings to a small scale; which, as a Serbian crew member put it, "melt away easily" during the two months when the worker



returns to land to find out that their immediate and extended family members need large investments for school tuition, hospital expenses or the purchase of household goods.

At 26, Ivan is a seasoned waiter from Romania but disillusioned with the tourism industry in his country. As lower level wait staff in the pool and dining areas, he works long hours, always on his feet. He has had three contracts so far and he expects to do five more, as he envisions himself as a small business owner in the future. He thinks he is doing well on his savings and points out that he would spend much more money on himself and his friends and family if here were on land. He jokingly explains how his family members think so much higher of him now that he is bringing home “love boat money.”

In a context of regional economic disparity, while rent based gains are preferred, business ownership implicates higher social status. Yet, such investments are risky and depend on social and economic networks in place. Some of these investments are fail; according to the experiences of several seafarers interviewed so far, the failure of small businesses at home is a key reason to return to the cruise industry. While the pervasive dream of saving for a house or a small business is common, the viability of that dream depends on the economic and socio-cultural context of each location. As a Turkish waiter explains, most of the jobs on board are at least one step lower than the qualifications of the employee would warrant on land and most seafarers wait to embark on new careers, such as small businesses, upon return, rather than capitalize on their positions on board. Yet, immediate needs of family members—for example weddings, education or health care—are likely to become priorities over long term business plans as returning crew members underscore that being able to afford such expenses is valued in the community and provide a sense of *middling* back home.

Mikael is a young Serbian waiter (24) who recently started his third contract in the cruise industry. He started out working in the tourism industry in Serbia, but thought that his English skills were too limited to rise in the ranks. He decided, like many others, that a good way to travel and improve his language skills would be in the cruise industry, working as a head waiter. Mikael believes that the tourism industry is expanding in Serbia, especially through river cruises. His hope is to transfer to the river cruise industry upon his return, but would rather own a small boat. He is confident that he could make a middle-class, living down the Danube. He is anxious to return for further contracts to be able to afford a boat, or qualify for a loan, and he believes that his work on the cruise is putting him ahead of his peers, providing a seed corn for his future boat investment.

Broadly, the Balkans feature a high unemployment rate for young men of this age group, especially those who do not have access to higher education or excellent language skills. The river cruise industry is a growth area for Serbia



and the Serbs who do work on river cruises tend to occupy higher level positions such as cruise staff or directors (Dragin et al, 2014). However, there are comparatively few Serbs on the river cruises, as the industry requires higher education levels and/or advanced linguistic capabilities. The hierarchy of labor that divides different nationalities into different types of labor on cruise lines operates in similar ways in the river cruise lines as well. For instance, Romanians on river cruises tend to be lower-paid staff employed in large numbers. Hence, investment in the river cruise industry may not carry as much hope of upward mobility for, say, a Romanian as it might for a Serbian.

Local tourism industries have their own networks of employers and employees, and outsiders are not always welcome. The liminality of cruise workers, who are isolated and absent from the local job markets, lead to additional marginalization: the local markets and communities project the same spending and remittance patterns they would expect from migrant workers, but seafarers do not benefit from the bonding resources among migrant communities and bridging effects of host-country networks that characterize migrant work. As a young Turkish bartender explained, cruise work is a “black box” disconnected from work on land. They may be able to save more money over shorter periods of time, but seafarer’s ability to settle and benefit from the fruits of labor are less likely, unless they have strong home networks and families to support their re-engagement upon return. The longer the seafarer takes to “save” money, the harder it becomes to take advantage of land-based opportunities.

Upgrading Human and Mobility Capital

Another reason that cruise workers retain transient contracts is to seek additional investments in the form of human capital—for example, pursuing higher education, or learning languages—in order to be able to migrate. For young people without access to higher education opportunities back home, the lack of language skills may be a large obstacle to employment and migration, especially in regions such as the Balkans that depend on a vibrant tourism industry. Many young workers from Turkey and Southeast Europe, complain about their lack of English language skills. In that sense, cruise ships are perceived as the equivalent of a language immersion program, where the worker seeks to gain the language and hospitality skills which fill key capability gaps, especially for those with migration aspirations. Time on the boat can, in theory, arguably provide *replacement skills* that can lead to better jobs back home or improve their chances for middling transnationally. In the absence of family support, transient positions play the role of a surrogate family that provides skills and resources toward future degrees and enhanced career prospects abroad.



Mariana is a 22 year-old Macedonian woman who works as floater staff on a cruise line. She is college educated but could not find satisfactory jobs in the Macedonian labor market after graduation. Her English skills are limited so she considers cruise work to be a good opportunity to learn and practice languages. She does not have a set job but rather floats between child-care services, family-friendly retail shops in the atrium, and hospitality in the restaurant. Her dream is to complete a master's degree in child education when she returns to Macedonia, and she believes in a few more contracts, she will have saved just enough to enable full time education while also providing for her mother.

Even though women in the cruise industry work at about a 1:5 ratio compared to males, at least some males consider them a threat to their jobs as a result of the "feminization" of "male" work position in the hotel portions of the cruise. Yet, cruise jobs nevertheless still present an attractive alternative to home employment conditions that may carry adverse cultural and social expectations for women (Bin and Morris, 2011). Seafarers point out that gender plays a significant role in that many women find themselves at risk or under threat as they try to earn money in the tourism sector. Female interviewees from Balkan states, especially those who are more skilled, evidently believe that cruise industry provides freedom from the constraints to upward mobility they would otherwise face in their home environments.

Ceyda (32) is a Turkish guest services manager on a cruise ship. She studied public relations in a southern Turkish city well-known for its tourism industry, initially worked in local hotels, and after divorcing an abusive husband became a hotel manager. Still, a single woman trying to survive in a small town, she became frustrated with male managers who believed they could demand sexual favors from a divorcee. This is when she decided to respond to an advertisement for a cruise line guest services representative. The position was lower than her manager position in Turkey, and she had to save some money for the original flight to meet up with the ship; but once on the job, she was able to rise to a guest manager position. She does not necessarily enjoy dealing long hours with guest demands but over the last two years, she has been able to save money. Her goal is to stay for at least one more contract to raise the \$2,500 that an international placement agency requires to get her sponsorship with an international hotel in Florida. She is certain that her international experience on the cruise line will help her as she tries to migrate to the United States and her hope is to pursue a master's degree that would eventually help her if she ultimately returns to Turkey.

Whether transient positions on cruise ships are viewed as a process to initiate migration, save toward educational opportunities, or as stepping stones toward a new career, the vision of a dream job or other goal enables young men and women to endure challenging work environments. Given the common discourse of endless global possibilities that permeates the career



aspirations of young people in transition countries, the psychological effects of having goals should not be underestimated. The future gains that workers expect from their transient jobs sustain their ability to make it through each contract. On the other hand, such goals provide a moving target, frequently requiring that they stay longer than planned and often warrant a return to the cruise ship employment. This tendency toward pursuit of “just one more contract” in an effort to achieve aspirational goals creates an entrapment effect.

The Long Run: Repeated Cruise Work

At 40, Arben is an Albanian dining hall manager on a cruise ship. He is easy-going and humorous, skills he says he has honed aboard cruise ships over the past nine years. While he originally thought it would be just for a few years, he got married and now has two children. For a while, each time a contract ended, he would think it time to return home; but his young family, his cousins and his ailing mother need the support. He can effectively provide for their financial needs as long as he is on the boat. He has had a number of promotions on the ship—starting out as a busboy and eventually rising to dining hall manager. He does not believe he could have risen as far as he has if he had not returned to cruise work, and he does not believe he could have had the same experience back home. He hopes to stay on a few more years and eventually “retire” to start a business with his childhood friend.

The continuing attractiveness of cruise jobs remains, to a certain extent, a function of the failure of land positions to deliver (Artini et al, 2011). When asked why they return to the cruise lines for repeated contracts, cruise workers often argue that there are not many viable alternatives on land. For workers in the service or tourism sectors, where many of the Balkan crew originate, employment conditions at home are transient as well. The unsteady and unpredictable nature of land jobs in the service sector, and perceived lack of ability for locals to rise to management positions in international chains present clear career development challenges. As a crew member from Serbia observes, “even if you are very talented, you can never rise . . . everyone wants to pull you down.” As cruise agencies typically seek to retain trained cruise employees through repeated contracts, those interviewed for this study unanimously report that repeat employment on a cruise ship is a safe bet. Perhaps ironically, Balkan cruise workers perceive more stability from these 9-10 month contracts that have the possibility of being renewed than the transient situations in which they would otherwise find themselves on land.

Emilija is a single mother from Croatia who has been working in the cruise industry for six years. She had a short-lived marriage and her daughter lives with an aunt. An experienced waitress, Emilija originally applied to the cruise lines because the pay was better. Over the course of her years in the cruise



lines, she was promoted to head waitress in the dining room. She has been able to save money and send it to the aunt who takes care of her daughter. She misses her daughter a lot, especially when she is serving same-aged children at her dining tables.

Recently, Emilija decided to stay on land at the end of her last contract term. Initially, she was hopeful that she could find a job, given the years of experience she had in the cruise industry and her high ratings and reviews. However, on land, she says she is “just another hospitality worker,” and has not been able to identify a position that would pay well enough to provide for her family’s living expenses. Within six months of her disembarkation, Emilija decided to return to the cruise lines and was welcomed back immediately and with a better contract. Despite her preference to the contrary, the long-distance mothering began once again.

Emilija’s situation is typical of the conditions one finds in marginalizing work locations. The cruise industry is a “total experience,” where employees live at their work site and are surrounded by their job requirements 24/7 without much contact with their families and the outside world beyond a continuous stream of cruise guests (Chin, 2008). They are also marginalizing experiences, in the sense that the experience and skills that are gained in the years spent at sea may not translate to connections, networks or human capital that is recognized on land. The flexibility of labor that allows workers to be hired immediately without any visa requirements on ships also means that their legal status is unchanged when they emerge from their contracts, generally making them ineligible for jobs outside of their home country. As such, the workers are triple-marginalized: they have acquired somewhat *empty* human capital that does not immediately translate to better jobs, they have lost the social capital and networks and skills that they had before they started, and their legal position has not improved. If remittances are used to fund the expenses of family members, then it is very difficult for the worker to move away from the cruise industry as that is the most likely industry to re-hire them at that point.

In the long run, providing a sustained income to a number of dependents and family members with “love boat money” can provide workers the prestige and social acceptance they desire back home. If repeatedly hired by cruise lines, they are able to continue upholding their familial obligations, who in turn may be able to sustain a middle class lifestyle. By the same token, cruise workers experience acute losses associated with prolonged time away: they miss their children and families, whom they only see two months a year. They are in effect cut-off from networks of friends and family, unable to take care of elder parents in person even as their children grow in their absence. After a prolonged journey, even despite possible at-sea promotions, they may remain semi-skilled workers without good prospects on land. The de-skilling that arises out of repetitive jobs in effect prevents growth in areas that could lead to



better salaries, and they remain outside the networks that allow land-based workers to find new jobs. As a result, their best option ultimately may be to return to the cruise ships for yet another contract. “Next time my ship embarks here, I will still be aboard,” says Arben. “I am always aboard.”

Conclusion

In practice, far too often, transient careers are neither *transient* nor *careers*. However, the gains that people perceive themselves as making—whether savings that would not have been possible at home, or a degree that may have otherwise been unaffordable, to a career path that they never imagined was possible—keep cruise workers in a state of path dependency that transient jobs create. It is very important to contextualize the desires and hopes and dreams of cruise workers as a crucial part of how they survive, and in many cases, thrive under the difficult conditions of their shifts. The fact that they repeatedly return (which ironically keeps the cruise industry work conditions from evolving) is not simply a story of sheer desperation but rather of steadfast determination by cruise workers who believe they may achieve futures that otherwise would not be attainable on land.

Given the segmented nature of seafarer pay scales and positions on the ships, Balkan cruise crews, arguably benefit more than their counterparts from China or Indonesia (Artini et al, 2011). In the cruise-world hierarchy of racialized and stereotyped workers, the Balkan crews constitute a middle strata, with positions that give them access to higher tips and a guest-facing work experience that can improve their linguistic skills. However, even these opportunities reinforce the marginalized positions of the Balkans vis-à-vis Europe, where countries, even those admitted to the European Union, might remain second class servers to their neighbors. In many ways, they owe their relative success and repeated employability to the fact that they are almost—but not quite—like the guests themselves. In this respect, the cruise lines serve as a metaphor for the unequal relationship between West European states and the region. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Balkan seafarers are as much entrapped in transient jobs on cruises, as their countries are entrapped in a perpetual transition with respect to their integration with Europe.

Given the controlled environment in which cruise crews operate and the emotional as well as physical labor that is required to thrive, one of the ways that crew members rediscover their own agency is to identify aspirational goals. Every goal and hope discussed in this study, whether a boat, a house or a graduate degree or money to repatriate, they are individualized and personal goals, defined and designated, and speak to the desires of the individual seafarer. Hopes of middling back home allow seafarers to survive their total work environment. However, these goals are also influenced by the economic structure of the transition economies from which the seafarers hail, responding



to particular economic and social stumbling blocks unique to each country. So while the seafarers control what they can in terms of what they hope to do with their savings, the context of life on land in the Balkans determines their ability to ultimately realize those dreams.

The manifest downside is that reaching those goals may entrap the seafarers in a vicious, perpetual cycle of *just one more* contract or term with the cruise ship to reach goals that remain elusive due to structural or familial challenges. Each time a parent gets sick, a baby is born, a business fails, or other catalytic event transpires the seafarer has few other options but to return to the cruise line. In turn, the cruise line welcomes trained and successful workers with open arms, but with the same set of transient work conditions that led to their workers' departure in the first place. Young transient workers may gain improved language skills, knowledge and know-how of the principles of hospitality services and experience with guest relations along the way, but the unique cruise environment leaves little room for qualifications to translate between sea and land-based opportunities, at home or abroad. More often than not, temporary workers find themselves marginalized from the local entrepreneurship capital, social networks, job opportunities and mobility capital that would arise from knowledge of the informal sector in their home countries. The lack of such knowledge and networks stunt the growth of the investments, real estate or human capital gains that they set as goals for their savings, in effect furthering a prolonged cycle of entrapment.

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